

ENTRY PLANNING FOR EQUITY-FOCUSED LEADERS

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**Empowering Schools
and Communities**

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*To those courageous
enough to lead together
for racial justice*

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FOREWORD

The spring of this year marks the thirtieth anniversary of my selection as superintendent of schools in Long Beach, California, our state's third-largest school system. I was literally vetted for the job during the 1992 Rodney King riots that had engulfed the urban core of both Los Angeles and Long Beach with unprecedented loss of life and destruction of property.

In selecting me, an insider African American area superintendent who had grown up in the community but had attended parochial schools, the Long Beach school board seemed to be saying that if social chaos and disruption were the order of the day, then I was the person most likely to work with school staff, parents, community, law enforcement, and others to restore order. There was no time to focus on the historic nature of my appointment as the first person of color to head the school system following 110 years of white male leadership, although the *Los Angeles Times* headline did famously announce: "Minority Selected to Head Long Beach School District."

Because I had a successful ten-year run in Long Beach that culminated in my winning the McGraw Prize and the district winning the prestigious Broad Prize for Excellence in Urban Education *without* a written and published entry plan focused on equity, a skeptical reader picking up this new timely book by Jennifer Perry Cheatham and her colleagues Rodney Thomas and Adam Parrott-Sheffer might

be tempted to cavalierly say something like: “If he can do it without an entry plan focused on equity, then so can I.” In my judgment, nothing could be further from the truth. Long Beach would have gotten better a whole lot sooner if the excellent advice coming from this new contribution to organized and thoughtful approaches to leading with equity front and center had been available back when. And even though my time in Long Beach was challenging, it pales in comparison to what our school leaders are facing today in terms of both the COVID-19 pandemic and the racial reckoning, along with the inevitable backlash associated with the same. It’s comforting to know that help is on the way with resources like this one.

Each of the chapters in this incredibly valuable book is designed, in a step-by-step way, to help practitioners understand both themselves and the various contexts in which they will be working as they put equity front and center. While I thoroughly enjoyed each one, I really identified with and relished chapter 3 on “understanding context,” because it goes a long way toward explaining my brief and not so stellar tenure as superintendent of schools in San Diego, California, the state’s second-largest school system.

In 2005, following my award-winning tenure in Long Beach, I was safely ensconced as a professor of practice at the Rossier School of Education at the University of Southern California, when a search firm reached out asking about my interest in returning to the superintendency via San Diego, about ninety miles south of Long Beach. Again, if this book and its critical guidance had been available back then, I believe that I might have done a much better job as superintendent there.

I mistakenly and cavalierly thought that I knew and understood the context because San Diego was “just another Navy town like Long Beach,” as I famously said to the eager search consultant at the time. What I didn’t know and understand at the time is that context for a new leader is so much more than the service branch of the military that had been there for years. It’s multifaceted, and includes the

personal, the organizational, the occupational, and the social. My view of the San Diego context was incredibly shortsighted, and that contributed to my brief tenure there.

For example, I had always worn my ability to get along with teacher unions as a singular badge of honor. What I didn't understand about the San Diego context was that the editorial board of the local newspaper was highly suspicious and deeply skeptical of any new leader giving a priority to getting along with unions. This unwittingly influenced—in a negative way—the initial coverage of my entry. Secondly, as an African American who understood that community in Long Beach, I thought that I would easily understand that same community in San Diego. Again, I was wrong. Where the African American community in Long Beach historically identified with the Democratic party, significant elements of the community in San Diego, especially church pastors, identified with the Republican party and actually welcomed the philanthropy coming from the conservative Walton Foundation, which was interested in disrupting the school system by investing in charter schools that would be run out of empty classrooms on church properties.

In chapter 3, these authors brilliantly use the Baltimore case study of Dr. Sonja Santelises' return as CEO to fully dissect in rich detail what the on-the-ground context should look like as a successful entry plan is framed around equity as a guiding principle, and how a new leader goes about putting that into practice.

This important and practical book also delivers a critical message that sometimes can get obscured in leadership careers, namely, that our approach to entry is crucial and may define the course, trajectory, and success of our time in the job. Given the persistent gaps in opportunity and achievement in our schools and districts, in virtually every context, nothing is more important for today's school leaders than framing entry with equity. Throughout this book, these coauthors consistently deliver on that important promise with rich and concrete examples from the field at all leadership levels.

One of my long-standing assignments in an education policy and governance course I teach is to require students to attend a local school board meeting and prepare a written analysis of what they have observed. Because I had been reading the news stories and watching the television accounts of disruption of school board meetings both in Southern California and across the nation, I decided to go to a local school board meeting recently to see firsthand what is going on—and to get a taste of what I was exposing my students to.

Here in the Coachella Valley of Southern California, there are three school systems—Palm Springs, Desert Sands, and Coachella Valley. I chose to attend the Desert Sands meeting, that community being demographically the most suburban and upscale of the three. During public testimony at the packed board meeting, I was treated to a cornucopia of “culture warrior grievance” as speaker after speaker strode to the podium and accused the superintendent and the board of every possible manner of abusing and harming the K–12 school children under their care. Their list of abuses included supporting vaccine mandates for students and staff, teaching critical race theory, and forcing high school students to watch “CNN in the Classroom.” A couple of weeks after that board meeting, the superintendent of the district announced that, with the arrival of his first grandchild coming in the spring, he would be retiring as superintendent. As we all know, the Desert Sands superintendent is joining record numbers of superintendents and principals who are leaving their posts as the third school year of the pandemic unfolds.

We need to replace them with a new cadre of leaders who are not going to shrink from or quietly ignore the equity agenda in order to play it safe as this new kind of politics unfolds, which is yet another reason why this book is so important.

I say this to make clear that equity-minded school leaders are under consistent and brutal attack right now in America, and they are going to need every help, road map, and guide in order to be successful. Cheatham and her colleagues have done a masterful job of

delineating, step by step, what is needed by principals, superintendents, and other educational leaders in the critical and important areas of context, trust building, listening with empathy, understanding, changing the narrative, and galvanizing for action. Even more importantly, they've captured the real-time voices of leading superintendents, principals, and others to show the reader that this is not some academic tome with no relation to the extraordinary circumstances unfolding on the ground right now with the outcome uncertain.

It's clear that this new brand of school politics is not going away anytime soon. In fact, recent news reports indicate that several states are moving to make school board elections partisan, moving away from the long-standing practice of nonpartisan local school board elections in the United States. While Tennessee, Arizona, Missouri, and Florida are leading this new change effort, it's important to remember that Republicans now control the state legislatures in thirty-two states, more than at any time in history.

We often refer to those on the frontlines of education today as heroes. This important new book is heroic in that it provides critical guidance to those to whom our country currently owes a tremendous debt of gratitude for courageously leading the effort to create a bright future for youngsters who historically have been underserved in our nation's public schools. We won't be able to do that critical and important work successfully without timely new books like this one. A well-deserved and heartfelt thanks to these courageous authors for putting equity front and center in our nation's public schools.

—Carl A. Cohn,
Professor Emeritus,
Claremont Graduate University

INTRODUCTION

—JENNIFER PERRY CHEATHAM

When I accepted the job as superintendent in Madison, Wisconsin, in February 2013, I knew I was walking into an equity leadership challenge unlike any of the challenges I had faced before. My first few months on the job would either confine or expand my possibilities for success.

On the surface, leading the Madison schools might have seemed less complicated than my prior leadership positions. It was a mid-size urban district of approximately twenty-seven thousand students in fifty schools. The student body's reported demographics were diverse—about 10 percent Asian, 20 percent Black, 20 percent Latino, 40 percent White, and 10 percent two or more races—and approximately half qualified for free and reduced lunch. There were no segregated schools in the city, thanks to some voluntary desegregation agreements made years ago, and there were no schools that were severely over- or underresourced. The population of English language learners, at 25 percent, was steadily increasing, as was the district's commitment to bilingual education. Students with disabilities comprised 14 percent of the student body, and the district had a strong reputation for inclusive education. It was home to the University of Wisconsin–Madison's top-ranked School of Education, which

trained many of the district's principals and teachers, and located in the state capitol. The city was regularly recognized and listed as one of the best places to live in America.

However, Madison's challenges at the time of my entry were profound and multifaceted, as complex as any I had seen. The Wisconsin legislature had recently passed Act 10, which stripped collective bargaining rights from unions, leaving the teacher corps demoralized and the teacher union combative. The school board had just rejected a charter school proposal that would focus on serving Black youth, leading to diminished trust between the school district and the Black community. To make matters worse, just after my arrival, the Wisconsin Council on Children and Families issued a startling report on racial disparities in the city of Madison and the surrounding Dane County. It exposed gaps in Black-White prosperity across dozens of indicators, worse than the rest of the state and the nation, causing shame and confusion for those who benefited most.¹ Madison's White progressive community had not yet begun to reconcile the mounting evidence that systemic racism made it difficult for people of color, especially Black people, to thrive there. Trust was low, the demand for change pervasive, and the school district sat at the center of it all.

Despite these challenges, all I could see were possibilities, including the prospect of entering the district in a way that would honor the depth and complexity of the problems the school system faced, so many related to race and racism. In the design of my entry, I hoped to listen deeply with my head and heart, produce an honest and compassionate assessment of strengths and challenges, build healthy routines for making meaning and learning together, create momentum, and boost confidence. Most of all, I wanted to galvanize a community for action. As a White woman charged with leading an equity agenda, I also understood that I needed to work together with leaders of color every step of the way. By doing so, we could build a foundation together, from which transformational change might grow.

I share this personal scenario because stories like it exist everywhere, each one unique to the leader and the context, but still variations on a theme. These scenarios do not just demand intentional leadership entry, but leadership entry that is focused on equity from the start. This book was written to help new leaders or leaders in new positions use those first months on the job to build the trust, credibility, and impetus necessary for sustainable change in their organizations and the communities they serve.

In it, we share a framework, not a blueprint, for how to design one's leadership entry tailored to context. We tell our stories and share hard-won lessons from those experiences. We share the stories and reflections of other leaders from a variety of backgrounds and stages of their careers, all equity-focused leaders who have been intentional in their initial leadership moves. Most importantly, we invite our readers to reflect on their own stories and experiences. Our intended audience includes leaders of every race, ethnicity, and gender; top leaders in organizations and mid-level managers; people who work in school districts or adjacent to them; and both novice and experienced leaders. Our audience also includes experienced leaders who are pivoting their strategy or refreshing their leadership at a critical time. And while this book focuses on leaders who serve minoritized youth and families, we believe it will be useful for leaders who lead in every context—urban, suburban, and rural—and in communities that are reflective of every demographic group.² This book is for any educational leader who wants to design a personal leadership entry plan that is equity-focused and human-centered.

CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

The typical problems—and unintended consequences—associated with leadership entry in education are abundant.³ New leaders risk glossing over local context and history, which can diminish trust and produce blind spots. They may go too fast or too slow, with

little communication or rationale, which can cause frustration and confusion. They can sometimes jump to solutions and strategies too quickly, solving the wrong problems and alienating local practitioners and community members. They may rely on data sources and data analysis processes that reinforce negative stereotypes and oversimplified narratives. Practically speaking, even in the best-case scenarios, the process can leave the leader feeling exhausted only a few months into the job.

In public school systems, leadership entry happens in the spotlight, in a high-stakes political environment, often facing pressure for immediate results. Missteps early on can make it impossible to recover, and missed opportunities to develop shared goals, shared understanding, and collective responsibility for progress can result in the onus falling on the leader's shoulders alone. For women and people of color, the scrutiny is even more intense, and the result is that leaders often leave their positions too soon. Superintendents running the country's largest school districts, for example, stay on the job for about six years on average, hardly enough time to make sustainable change, and that tenure is shorter for female superintendents and for superintendents in high-poverty districts or districts with high percentages of students of color, where stability is most needed and where leaders of color tend to lead.⁴ Principal tenure is even more problematic, with an average of four years on the job and fewer for principals working in high-poverty schools.⁵ Even nonprofit leaders, especially in high-stress fields, have similarly high turnover rates.⁶

Add in the possibility of navigating a crisis during leadership entry, and it becomes even more precarious. From a budget crisis to a student or faculty death to a natural disaster, crises are inevitable in these jobs. In a crisis, a leader must do the day-to-day work while simultaneously grabbing on to the opportunities the crisis affords. Gianpiero Petriglieri, an expert on leadership and learning, states that leaders must also "hold" the people they serve during crises. He says, "In psychology, the term has specific meaning. It describes

the way another person, often an authority figure, contains and interprets what's happening in times of uncertainty.”⁷ During a crisis, leaders must put their communities at ease through information flow and transparency, provide opportunities for voice and influence, and take care of people, all essential skills for leadership entry.

Today, however, the stakes have never been higher. As a result of the crisis wrought by the COVID-19 pandemic, new education leaders must do more than stabilize their organizations and communities; they must find a better way forward. According to Linda Darling-Hammond from the Learning Policy Institute, “It’s clear that COVID-19 has launched us into a new era for education. If we get it wrong, we risk widening opportunity and achievement gaps in ways that will have long-standing impacts on our society and economy. But if we get this right, we may be able to finally achieve the empowering and equitable learning opportunities for all children that will provide the foundation for a thriving future for us all.”⁸ In other words, new leaders now have an even higher standard to meet, and there is already evidence that leadership turnover has increased as a result, especially in the superintendency.⁹

These challenges are further amplified when we consider that the movement for racial justice in the US demands that institutional leaders everywhere focus on racial equity and other forms of oppression in their organizations from day one—inequities that have been magnified by the current health crisis—no matter their demographics. In education, racial inequity can take countless forms: unequal access to advanced coursework, absence of representation in the curriculum, lack of diversity among the workforce, or disproportionate use of exclusionary disciplinary practices; all of them result in disparate outcomes for Asian, Black, Indigenous, and Latinx youth. Every form reminds us of the reality that “racial groups are not standing on approximately equal footing.”¹⁰ Addressing structural and systemic inequities requires moving beyond acknowledging gaps between racial groups, which education leaders have been doing for the past

twenty years of education reform. Instead, they need to create deliberate and intentional racial equity strategies from the beginning.¹¹ Leadership entry, then, must be even more deliberate if the leader is going to identify the root causes of the problems their organizations and communities face, address problems rooted in systemic racism, galvanize a collective effort to face those problems head-on, and stay long enough to see it through.

Altogether, leadership entry in education is daunting, in that it demands leadership through complexity. As complexity experts David Snowden and Mary Boone explain, a “complex” system involves large numbers of interacting elements, a past and present that are intertwined and evolving, and external forces that are continually changing.¹² This reality ought not to paralyze the incoming leader. It merely emphasizes the importance of understanding context and expanding skill sets beyond the typical leadership moves. In other words, leadership entry in a complex environment is not as simple as diagnosing an organization and developing a plan. While best practices and experts and strategic planning processes certainly can get a new leader to a plan of action, leadership entry with attention to complexity requires looking for patterns, fostering ideas from those closest to the problems, and encouraging their growth. As Snowden and Boone suggest, “That is why, instead of attempting to impose a course of action, leaders must patiently allow the path forward to reveal itself. They need to probe first, then sense, and then respond.”¹³

We believe the entry of a new leader is an ideal time to begin the process of meaningful, equity-focused change, provided the leader is ready to start strong. That is because beginnings matter. Whether one is a new superintendent or central office leader looking to refresh goals and provide direction, a principal striving to transform a school’s culture, or a nonprofit leader who wants to be more attuned to the needs of its clientele or community, what happens earliest in the experience is critical. We know from research outside education that events from early in an experience are what people remember

the most. There is a productivity bump during the initial period of one's tenure.¹⁴ While we do not think the term "honeymoon period" reflects the reality of those first months on the job, especially now, leadership entry is ripe with opportunities. It offers a tremendous opportunity to gain insight, trust, and commitment to set the stage for collaborative learning, collective responsibility, and positive change that addresses educational inequality head on.

OUR BEGINNINGS

We wanted to write this book for transitioning leaders in the field because we have learned a lot about leadership entry that we think could prove useful for today's leaders, especially those committed to leading for equity. These lessons trace back to our relationships' beginnings and have only grown in depth and dimension over time. Knowing something about these beginnings, we believe, is essential for understanding our stance on this critical topic. We want to enter this book, just like we would enter a new role or a new community, by sharing with our readers a little about who we are and how we came to know one another.

I have known Rodney Thomas since our time working together in the Chicago Public Schools in 2008. When we first met, he was working in an office that focused on principal support, and I was starting as a chief area officer, or area superintendent, assigned to a set of twenty-five schools on the near South and West Sides of Chicago. Rodney had palpable, positive energy, a creative spark, and a love for life and all its challenges and opportunities. Every time I entered his office on the ninth floor of 125 South Clark, usually on Fridays for our weekly area chief meetings, I heard his voice call out from across the room, "Hey, Jen!" And if I ever stepped outside with Rodney onto the sidewalk, he seemed to know everyone. He was masterful at building relationships, exuding warmth and care. He also had a habit of attracting mentees who looked to him for affirmation and guidance.

Given Rodney's passion for talent development, I went to him early and regularly for advice on principal recruitment, hiring, induction, and support. Most importantly, he seemed to understand and appreciate how I was approaching the job. As a White woman, managing a group of principals for the first time without having been a principal, and in a part of the city with which I wasn't familiar, I was planning my entry with the utmost care, resisting any urge to play expert or savior. I knew I needed to work with the existing area team members to build the school support strategy together, drawing on their in-depth knowledge of our schools. I wanted our principals and teacher leaders to form a vibrant learning community, focused on improving student outcomes, so that we could support one another. Perhaps most important, I wanted to be clear to the communities that we served that while I was an outsider, I would listen, seek understanding, and use every ounce of power I could muster to help them make the changes they wanted for their children. One Friday, while riding on the elevator with Rodney and getting his advice on building my team's capacity, he hinted at his interest in joining it. As a Black man, born in the South, raised in Chicago, and committed to supporting communities that reflected his own identity, he had a vested interest in our success. By the time we stepped off the elevator, I had offered him a job as a specialist focusing on talent. We learned together that building and investing in a team of people with multiple perspectives, including historical perspectives, would be crucial to our success as equity-focused leaders.

We loved working together, and we were perhaps an unlikely duo. While we were both about the same age, we had experienced the world differently. I started my life in a working-class neighborhood on the North Side of Chicago. When we moved to a middle-class White suburb where my parents felt we would have a better life, I saw my opportunities expand. Rodney grew up mostly in a Chicago housing project called Cabrini-Green, where he experienced the impact of structural inequality firsthand. While I was taking the train

into the city for my violin lessons on Michigan Avenue during high school, Rodney traveled by bus to the far North Side to get a better education. While I stayed in Chicago and went to DePaul University for college, exploring my identity and privilege for the first time, Rodney went off to Grambling State University, an HBCU where, he says, “I learned to see my people as nothing short of brilliant.”

Despite our differences, we both grew up in large families with lots of love and deep relationships, so we liked a busy office filled with laughter and lots happening. For us, work was an extension of family. We both started our careers in teaching with a spirit of activism at the core, committed to lifting our students’ voices. We believed in shared leadership and the empowerment required for people to do their best work. We shared a vision of what was possible that centered on children and youth’s inherent capability. Moreover, we both stood in the discomfort that the world was not as it should be, something that we saw in our upbringings and faced every day as we traveled from school to school. We learned that attention to personal identity and expression of personal values would need to become a recurring theme in our leadership journeys.

In addition to the methodical and focused support we tried to provide our schools, we also positioned our office to solve problems that schools could not solve independently. We listened hard, dreamed big, tried things, and learned along the way. We heard from our teachers that it was hard to find promotional paths in the system, so we started a grassroots program to create more intentional leadership pipelines for star teachers. We heard that Local School Councils in our highest-poverty schools were often struggling to find good principal candidates, so we put on fun and festive professional recruiting events for council members and promising principals to meet one another.¹⁵ We heard that parents did not understand how to navigate the district structure, so we began holding regular parent forums to get their perspectives on our biggest problems. Together, we created a buzz about working in our area of the city that attracted

some of the best staff members and principals around. Most importantly, we were starting to get results in student achievement, which told us that there was something about calculated risk-taking that was a critical ingredient for success. We came to understand that the ways of working we embraced early on mattered and began to positively influence our schools' cultures.

There are distinct memories that bond us, too. I remember sitting in the car with Rodney after a visit to one of our schools, Skinner North, located just behind where Cabrini-Green once was. We sat in the parking lot and watched soberly as one of the remaining towers was smashed with a wrecking ball, making room for the Target store that stands there now. I remember thinking that I could not imagine having the neighborhood where I grew up destroyed before my eyes. There was nothing I could do for him in that moment but to bear witness. I also recall a parent meeting in North Lawndale, a Black community on the West Side of Chicago, where parents and teachers had rallied unexpectedly because they had heard a rumor that a local school was on the district's closing list. Because I was the face of the district, I was the focus of their anger and utter frustration that evening, built up over generations. As much as Rodney wanted to step in, he knew he couldn't. Given my position, and my positionality, it was my responsibility to do better. Together, we learned that these moments of holding one another's humanity, and the humanity of the communities we served, were as important as anything we learned to do as leaders for equity.

Adam Parrott-Sheffer was one of those talented principals we were trying to recruit. He had just graduated from the Harvard Graduate School of Education's principal preparation program and had eager, youthful energy that we admired. Born in the suburbs of Chicago, Adam grew up moving a lot, attending six schools in three states, with each move to a wealthier and Whiter community. His earliest and most consistent experience in these schools was getting in trouble for defending classmates mistreated by other students or

teachers. As a result, he spent a significant amount of time in the principal's office. However, a summer job in high school, working as a lifeguard alongside a Chicago public school teacher, influenced his thinking about teaching as a meaningful career, one in which he could get into more trouble on behalf of students who deserved better. After several years as a special educator with a focus on reading, Adam decided it was time to return to the principal's office where he spent so much time in his youth. He recognizes now that his early desires to change the world reveal what he calls "a naive worldview unique to those born into generational wealth, maleness, and Whiteness." He also readily acknowledges there is little in his narrative that would suggest that equity and racial justice in schools would become central to his life's work. However, what Rodney and I saw in Adam was a reflective stance that we did not often see in White male leaders. It revealed an understanding that equity-focused leadership requires a lifetime of internal work.

During Adam's search for his first principalship, he put himself in front of more Local School Councils than we could count, and he was dogged. Nevertheless, his boyish looks, cerebral personality, and race made him an unlikely match for our openings. He ended up landing an excellent principalship at Peterson Elementary, a one thousand-student preK–8 school on the North Side, and they welcomed him with open arms. The school was big and diverse, with a student body that spoke thirty-five languages across seventy nationalities. He was hired as an interim principal, which is a little like a year-long interview, but given that this was his first principalship, he did not mind the arrangement. He felt confident that he was the person for the job. At worst, the temporary status would give him a graceful "out" if it was not right in the end. Of course, Adam went on to be an excellent principal, growing into his role as an equity-focused, strategic, and collaborative leader.

And then, the area office structure in CPS was reorganized by a new CEO, our schools and teams split apart, and I accepted a

promotion to the central office to lead several high-profile initiatives aimed at improving teaching and learning, which leads to one final observation about our beginnings. Over those first four years that we knew each other, we had four different CEOs. As eager as we were to help each successive leader, rooting wholeheartedly for their success, none of us recall that they used formal leadership entry plans designed to learn about the school system or the community before making change. As a result, each time we experienced a leadership transition, we found ourselves coaching people through yet another reorganization, processing with our teams the next round of mandates or budget cuts, and trying to stay focused on what mattered most to the people working and learning in our schools. These leadership transitions were hard, and harder than they needed to be.

We hope this glimpse into our relationships' start illuminates some of the critical stances that we take as leaders, ones that we have forged through experience. Equity-focused leadership entry is not just about diagnosing the strengths and weaknesses of an organization and creating a plan of action. It is about creating the trust to make real change. It requires understanding yourself and your context. It requires deep listening, acknowledging historical pain, and creating spaces for healing. It requires motivating people, letting ideas emerge, and developing people's capacity to lead with and without you. Ultimately, we understand that our leadership positions are temporary. Your leadership approach, however, especially those steps you make early on, will leave behind ripples, for better or worse, that you cannot even see.

OUR APPROACH

Each of us went on to pursue other leadership roles—me as a superintendent, Rodney as a central office and nonprofit leader, and Adam as a principal and principal coach—in which we each used

a planned leadership entry approach. We all drew on the literature (see appendix A), including Barry Jentz's excellent plan book called *Entry: How to Begin a Leadership Position Successfully*. In it, Jentz suggests a "hit-the-ground-learning" approach with attention to complexity so as to develop an "in-depth, collective understanding" of the organization.¹⁶ We are indebted to him for his guidance.

Those early leadership entry moves, which emphasized transparency, relationship building, and learning, certainly helped us build the trust and credibility necessary to make positive change. It also helped us do hard things, get through difficult times, and struggle, learn, and grow with the communities we served. Looking back, however, we also see the missed opportunities. For example, we wish we would have been more explicit about the root causes of our biggest challenges from the beginning, problems rooted in systemic racism and oppression. In hindsight, we wish we had been more attuned to the way power works, not just for political reasons, but to help redistribute it. We also could have done a better job anticipating the emotional burden of leadership entry, especially for leaders of color, and planned accordingly.

This reflection has led naturally to some questions about the design of leadership entry, the kind of "how might we" questions that are often generated at the beginning of a human-centered design process.¹⁷

How might we:

- Consider our own racial, ethnic, and gender identities as we design?
- Pay closer attention to local history and regional context?
- Identify and understand the real problems our organizations face, especially problems rooted in systemic racism and oppression?
- Communicate our understanding in a way that creates new and true narratives?

- Engage those who have been negatively impacted in designing possible solutions?
- Attend to the pain and trauma experienced by those within the community and provide opportunities for healing?

The current literature provides practical steps, urges a collaborative inquiry approach, and differentiates a little for roles, but it does not adequately address the nuanced leadership moves necessary for leaders with a range of identity markers, especially women and leaders of color, to start their jobs strong. Our goal is to build on this literature by providing new guidance that is much more explicit about leadership entry for racial equity, introduce a more robust and present-day set of leadership stories to guide our work, and frame an ongoing conversation about the leadership dispositions necessary to lead for equity through complexity while sustaining ourselves and our communities.

HOW TO READ THIS BOOK

We begin with an overview of our new Entry for Equity framework, providing a rationale for each dimension of the framework and how it can be used to enhance the typical steps of an entry process. Each chapter that follows focuses on a single dimension of the framework; we further explain the importance of the dimension by drawing on our review of the literature, our empathy interviews with leaders, and our own experiences. Each chapter also features a leadership entry case example with a focus on that dimension, presenting leaders in a variety of roles, with different identity markers and lived experiences.

While the book is grounded in theory and research, it is practitioner-focused and action-oriented, so in addition to the background and case example, each chapter also includes practical implications, a skill to practice, and a set of reflective questions to help

with a leader's own personal planning. These ideas have also been compiled into one comprehensive reflective planning tool that can be found in appendix D. We suggest moving methodically through the book, but our readers may want to focus on a particular chapter. For that reason, the book has also been written so that each chapter can stand alone.

As a reminder, the book does not offer a step-by-step plan, or a guidebook, but a framework for individual planning, because context matters. It will require that leaders take stock, take calculated risks, and chart new paths forward with and for the communities they serve. In her book, *Coaching for Equity*, Elena Aguilar states:

[S]ocial, political, and economic divisions in the United States, and elsewhere, have become even more glaringly apparent. We see where people can't listen to each other, haven't built the skill and ability to learn from each other, lack empathy for each other, and are failing to achieve their goals and visions for peace. And yet . . . the desire for connection, freedom, and healing is stronger than the desire to hurt, dominate, and oppress . . . I believe the human desire for belonging and healthy community is paramount to all others, although I also recognize that some people's actions have not always aligned to this intention.¹⁸

Our goal is to help new equity-focused education leaders improve their ability to garner the trust, insight, and impetus to make transformational change in education, which we need now more than ever.

THE ENTRY FOR EQUITY FRAMEWORK

We designed the Entry for Equity framework to guide a nuanced set of actions during the first critical months of a job, unique to each leader's identity, role, and context. Developed based on our own experience, a review of relevant literature (see appendix A), and empathy interviews with a range of leaders who have recently started new jobs (see appendix B), we hope that the framework will offer new ways of thinking about leadership entry that have been missing from our collective leadership repertoires. Accompanied by guidance on the typical phases and steps a leader takes during their leadership entry, and with a focus on the most critical skills needed to execute those steps well, the framework provides a set of concepts to guide the design of an equity-focused leadership entry plan.

Our framework introduces eight dimensions that we believe leaders ought to consider in the design of their leadership entry. Taken together, these dimensions represent a theory of action, an “if . . . then . . .” statement that articulates the relationship between actions and outcomes.¹

If the leader:

- looks inward to understand their multiple identities as well as outward to understand the social, cultural, and historical context of the community they serve;
- commits to transparency in the process, is explicit about issues related to racism and oppression from the beginning, and actively builds trust along the way;

- centers the voices of those who are most experiencing the problems, listens with empathy to multiple perspectives, and develops a shared understanding of the organization's strengths, challenges, and opportunities;
- uses this shared understanding to tell an honest narrative about the organization that disrupts deficit thinking and racial stereotypes and galvanizes the community for action; and
- provides space for healing, self-care, and the care of others

then the leader is more likely to set in motion an equity-focused change effort that can lead to sustainable change. The eight dimensions described below, each interrelated, are essential for leaders who want to lead for equity from the beginning.

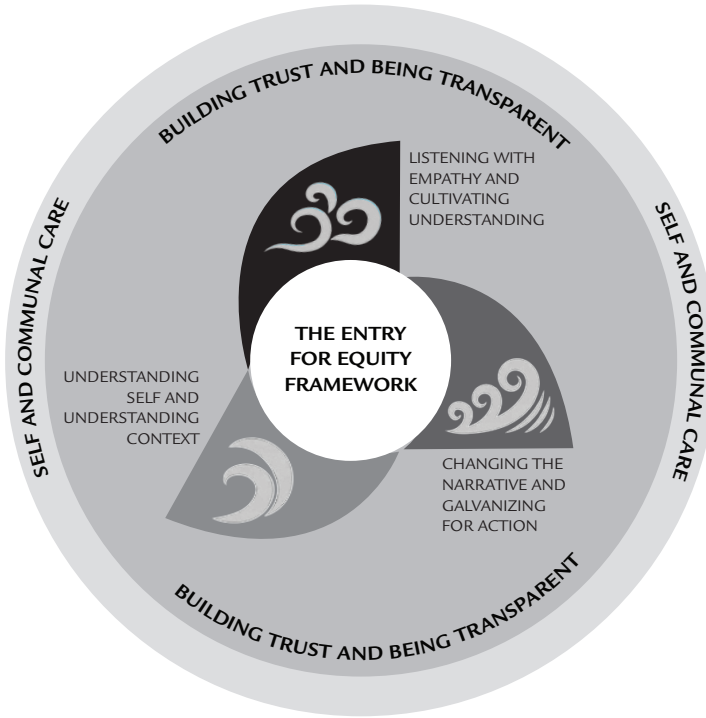
THE ENTRY FOR EQUITY FRAMEWORK

The Entry for Equity framework (figure 1.1) is designed to express the idea of building energy, movement, and power to produce change. In our experience, change is never linear, nor is leadership entry, but more like waves or wind, building momentum over time. Like waves, leadership entry is where small ripples can build over time into a powerful force. The framework also captures that every move we make as leaders should be done with trust building in mind and with care for both the people we serve and ourselves. Here, we provide an overview of each dimension.

Understanding Self and Understanding Context

Leadership entry with an equity focus requires that new leaders take the time to reflect on facets of their identities, with a focus on racial identity, in relation to the community they serve.² Reflecting on identity is crucial because our identities can provide strength and insight, but they can also produce blind spots, and assumptions can be dangerous when untested. Without reflection, leaders are more

FIGURE 1.1 Entry for Equity Framework



prone to paralyzing emotional triggers as well, common during leadership entry. Looking inward before looking outward is critical, as it will inform early leadership moves.

Equity-focused leadership entry also requires understanding the organizational and community context, including the history of oppression, racial justice leadership, and opportunity.³ In leadership entry, it is typical for leaders to map the current environment, including its funding, policies, and politics, but it is a misstep to gloss over its social, cultural, and historical roots. A new leader must identify the opportunities to build on success, understand the historical wounds that need healing, and ascertain the possible resistance one might face.

Building Trust and Being Transparent

Much of the existing literature on leadership entry emphasizes transparency. New leaders ought to communicate to their organizations and the communities they serve who they are, why they want to lead, and the core values that will guide them. Leaders should also make transparent what they are doing during their first days and weeks on the job and why. For equity-focused leaders, in addition, transparency requires being explicit about race, racism, and racial equity from the start. When leaders are transparent about their commitment to anti-racism from the beginning, they increase the chances that, together with the communities they serve, they can come to understand the real problems that stand in the way of progress.

Transparency also helps to build trust, especially with those who mistrust the organization. Students, parents, staff members, and community members will ask themselves: Will the new leader show me respect by listening to me? Will the new leader show me personal regard by going out of their way to see me? Will the new leader demonstrate competence early on? Will the new leader demonstrate personal integrity by keeping their word and staying true to core values and commitments?⁴ Every move either builds or reduces trust, and equity-focused leaders must design their entry plans accordingly.

Listening with Empathy and Cultivating Understanding

An essential aspect of equity-focused leadership entry is deep listening, focused on seeking out and centering the voices of marginalized groups who are often not heard. Not only does the act of listening build trust and produce healing, but it also leads to a more nuanced understanding of the way the organization works in relationship to the community it serves. It is critical to seek understanding of the organization's technical systems, structures, and routines as well as its relational ways of working—the way information flows, the nature of relationships, and how people talk about the organization and its community.⁵ In other words, the equity-focused leader must listen

with ears, eyes, and heart for clues about how things work and the real organizational culture, far beyond what is written on paper.

Just as crucial for equity-focused entry is how the leader interprets the information gathered during those first months on the job. Data analysis is vital because the way we present, analyze, and interpret data can oversimplify the issues, reinforce stereotypes, and lead to shallow problem definitions and faulty solutions. Ivory Toldson, a professor at Howard University, insists that we start with “good data,” then conduct “thoughtful analysis” to produce “compassionate understanding.”⁶ Most importantly, data analysis during leadership entry should ensure that the people behind the numbers inform collective sensemaking. Doing so will help the leader accurately identify the real equity-focused problems and begin to iterate potential solutions.

Changing the Narrative and Galvanizing for Action

In a typical formal leadership entry process, leaders share back what they think they have learned. But equity-focused leaders not only align their message, their audience, and their medium, they take advantage of their entry to communicate a new and genuine narrative focused on assets. Leadership entry offers us the opportunity to practice what Kim Scott calls “radical candor,” the ability to challenge a person, or a community, directly with love and care.⁷ In other words, equity-focused leaders use their entry to speak the truth and “speak to the future,” focusing on possibilities.⁸ Language matters, and it is crucial that leaders disrupt negative narratives from the start, especially about youth of color and their families.

Finally, leadership entry done well creates momentum, so new leaders often move seamlessly into strategy development after gathering information and insight about the organization. Equity-focused leaders, however, will ensure that the planning process is anchored to a vision worth pursuing, fosters collective responsibility for the organization’s problems and solutions, and is responsive to complexity. That requires being explicit about problems rooted in racism, and

allowing strategy, sometimes through intentional prototyping and testing, to emerge from the ground up.

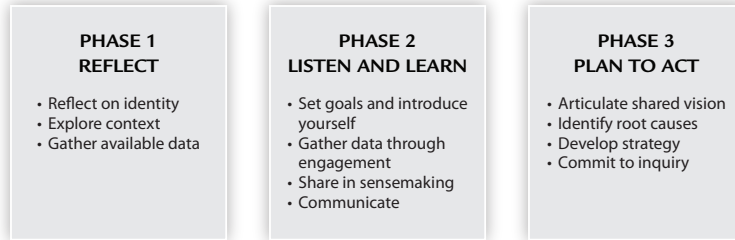
Self and Communal Care

Finally, equity-focused leadership entry requires an emphasis on self and communal care at every stage. Caring is important because leadership change is a disruptive event despite its hope and possibility. Staff may feel uneasy, uncertain that their voices will be heard and valued based on past experiences. The community may be wary of the new leader's ability to follow through on commitments given past disappointments. The leader is often so busy that self-care is an afterthought. Equity-focused leaders, however, recognize that leadership entry done well surfaces unresolved pain and that hearing painful stories can be retraumatizing for the leader, too, especially leaders of color.⁹ Anticipating the time and space necessary to hold and process these conversations, and to make room for emotion, is critical for everyone, including the leader. The act of listening, sensemaking, and action planning, however, can produce healing if done with love, care, and compassion. At minimum, a new leader should plan an entry process that causes no harm, especially to those who have been historically harmed the most. At its best, the process can result in the healing necessary for real change to occur.

TYPICAL COMPONENTS

In addition to these framework dimensions, we suggest leaders plan their entry with a few typical phases in mind (see figure 1.2).¹⁰ These phases (and the suggested steps within) do not have to be done in chronological order; iteration is necessary, and sometimes steps happen simultaneously. It is also important to note that while leadership entry is often mapped out over the first ninety to one hundred days on the job, it can be shorter or longer depending on context. The key is transparency about your goals and process. Through every phase

FIGURE 1.2 Leadership Entry Phases



and step, no matter the order or the length of time, a leader is paying keen attention to themselves and their community's reactions, adjusting as they go. Here we lay them out with some distinguishing features for the equity-focused leader.

Phase 1: Reflect on Self and Context

The entry process often begins before the official start date. During this phase, it is helpful to reflect on identity in relation to the local context, convene key advisers to gain essential insight into historical and political context, and pressure-test the specifics of the draft entry plan. It is also an excellent time to gather various existing data about organizational ways of working and outcomes. At this stage, the leader's objective is to "see the system" so that they are ready for listening, learning, and sensemaking.¹¹

Phase 2: Listen and Learn

Set goals and introduce yourself. As the official start date arrives, the leader will want to plan their introduction. A new leader typically describes why they are excited about the work, shares something personal about who they are and how it informs their approach, expresses their core values including their commitment to racial equity, and shares their leadership entry goals. The objective is to be transparent and begin the process of building trust.

Gather data through engagement. Before beginning the process of listening and learning, it is essential to define and communicate the inquiry questions that will drive the leader's data gathering. From there, the leader will decide on the information that can help answer those questions, including data gathered through engagement. The objective is to listen deeply to multiple perspectives about how the organization works and its impact, emphasizing nondominant voices.

Share in sensemaking. Once the leader has gathered relevant data, they must determine how to make sense of it, and the way one makes meaning of the data must be intentional. Leaders must discern what data to look at, how it should be displayed, and who should be involved in collaborative sensemaking. The leader's objective is to develop a deep understanding of the problems the organization and community face, and to form ideas about possible solutions.

Communicate. After the leader has made sense of that data, they will share what they have learned honestly, in a way that fosters reflection, inspires collective action, and disrupts stereotypes about students and families of color. The objective is to highlight what is possible with a focus on community assets, promote a shared understanding of the real equity-focused problems that stand in the way, and garner support for addressing them.

Phase 3: Plan to Act

For some, creating an action plan based on findings is the next logical step, and it may even be critical for building credibility as a leader. For others, it is not. Either way, it is crucial to think about using the entry process to galvanize for action in a complex environment. Knowing how to connect, inspire, and spur others toward increased leadership for equity is an integral part of leadership entry that can form the foundation for years to come.

In the following chapters, we explore each dimension, drawing out tangible examples, emphasizing the implications and skills needed to bring this dimension of the work to life, and offering a set of reflective questions for each leader's personal planning. We have also created a comprehensive reflective planning tool to help leaders plan their entry with attention to the framework dimensions (see appendix D). In all, we believe that the Entry for Equity framework, along with the reflective planning tool, will set up equity-focused leaders for success in ways that we have not seen previously. To lead for racial equity in schools, school systems, and related organizations, we must embrace this more nuanced set of knowledge, skills, and dispositions. By doing so, we can set the stage to work with our communities for the change our youth deserve.